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# Greening Our Schools

By Annie Hermansen-Báez, U.S. Forest Service – Southern Research Station

I recently had the opportunity to attend the Green Schools National Conference in West Palm Beach, FL, and was awed by the enthusiasm, breadth of information, and the number of participants and partnerships that were represented. Over 1200 attendees representing most, if not all, 50 states and several countries were in attendance. It forever changed my notion of what it means to be a "Green School" and inspired me to join the movement.

The Green Schools movement has grown in a relatively short span of time. The Florida Department of Environmental Protection's Office of Environ-

mental Education only began its Florida Green Schools Network recognition program in 2008 and the US Department of Education launched its national Green Ribbon Schools Program in 2011, with the first ever honorees recognized in 2012.

### *What Makes A School "Green"?*

There isn't just one practice or program that makes a school green. A green school can be a new or remodeled school that incorporates more energy efficient and environmentally friendly building materials, fixtures and appliances. It can be a school that uses green cleaners and practices recycling or one that



incorporates lessons into their curriculum that help students to understand sustainable concepts, such as the importance of water conservation and reduction of energy use. It can also be a school that reinforces healthy eating and physical activity habits of students and school staff.

In general, green schools incorporate a range of practices that reduce environmental impact and

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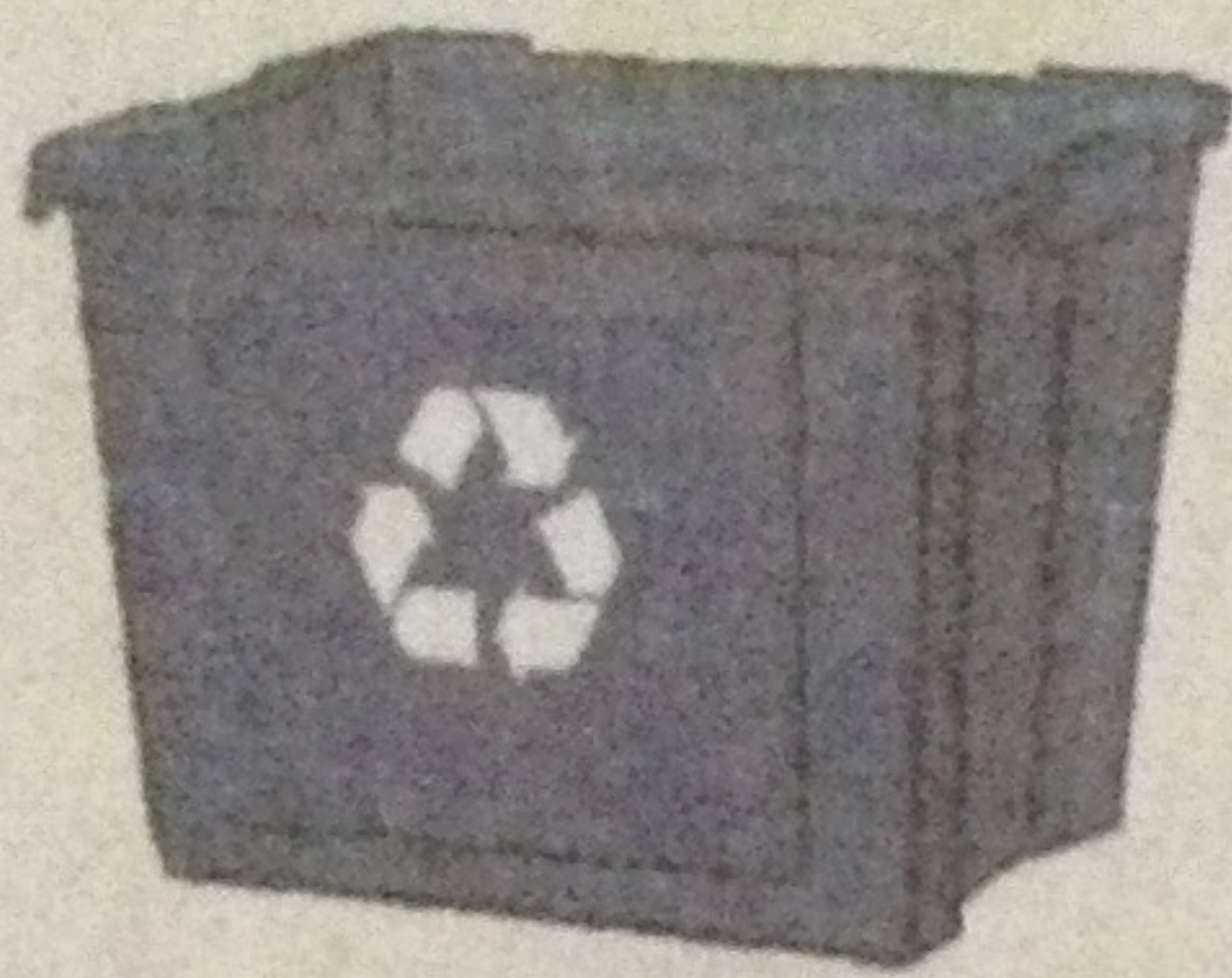
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costs, improve the health and wellness of students and staff, and provide effective environmental and sustainability education, incorporating science, technology, engineering, and math (STEM) concepts, civic skills, and green career pathways. Strong partnerships and networks are also important. Following is a list of some of the specific practices and programs that public, private, and charter schools across the country have implemented to become green schools.

**Recycling Programs** – School recycling programs provide a learning experience for students, teachers, staff, administration, and parents by teaching the basics of recycling, sustainability, and environmental stewardship. Recycling can also help schools save money through avoided disposal costs.

**Idle Free School Zones** – Many

schools have implemented idle reduction policies to help improve air quality around schools and reduce energy use. Driving parents and school bus drivers are encouraged to turn off their engines while waiting in the school zone. Unnecessary car and school bus idling affects human health, pollutes the air, wastes fuel, and causes unnecessary engine wear.

**EPA School Indoor Air Quality Tools for Schools Programs** – Good indoor air quality (IAQ) is a major component of a healthy and comfortable learning environment. Leaky roofs; problems with heating ventilation and air conditioning systems; insufficient cleaning or excessive use of cleaning chemicals; and other maintenance issues can trigger a host of health problems – such as allergies and asthma – that increase absenteeism and reduce academic performance. The EPA's IAQ Tools for Schools Framework offers a comprehensive guidance for districts just beginning to address IAQ or those already working on IAQ management.

**Farm to School Program** – This program connects schools (K-12) and local farmers, food pro-

cessors, and manufacturers in order to serve local of regionally produced foods in school cafeterias. The objectives are to serve healthy meals in school cafeterias, improve student nutrition, and support local farmers. Also included is food-related curriculum development and experiential learning opportunities through school gardens, farm tours, farmer in the classroom sessions, chefs in the classroom, culinary education, education sessions for parents and community members, and visits to farmers' markets.

**School Gardens/Worm Composting Bins** – Gardening teaches kids about where their food comes from and helps teachers to reinforce concepts about nutrient cycles, food production, water conservation, and much more. Worm composting uses worms to recycle food scraps and other organic material into compost, which can then be used to grow plants in their gardens.

**School Tree Planting Programs** – These projects connect students to the benefits of trees and foster environmental stewardship. Students learn proper tree planting and tree care techniques

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and learn to take pride in the trees that they help plant. The trees help beautify the school campus, provide shade, reduce cooling costs, and many other environmental benefits.

**Schoolyard Habitat and Outdoor Classrooms Programs** – Creating natural spaces on school grounds provides places where students can observe, draw, write, think and question. Projects include restoring native wildlife habitat and outdoor classroom areas that include seating, tables and shade structures. Schoolyard habitats serve as living laboratories that can help teachers reinforce science, geography, math and English concepts and meet the requirements of national and state educational standards. Research studies show that a mix of outdoor instruction and indoor teaching leads to improved students achievement.

**Walk/Bike to School Programs** – Participating schools usually pick one day per week to promote walking and biking as a safe, healthy, and fun way for kids and their parents to get to school. Pine Jog Elementary School in West Palm Beach, for example, promotes “Walking Wednesdays.” This program encourages physical activity, cleaner environments (reduces congestion and air-pollution emissions from cars), safety (walking to school can help build support for infrastructure improvements and traffic calming measures around schools), and community benefits (reduces traffic congestion, boosts a sense of community, and improves neighborhood connections). Morning Mile Programs are another way to encourage kids to walk/run.

**Increased Opportunities for Physical Activity** – Physical activity helps lower the risk of obesity, reduces stress, increases endorphins, and much more. Neurosci-



entists are also proving that movement actually makes our brain cells grow! Moving our muscles produces proteins that travel through the bloodstream into the brain, where they play a key role in our highest thought processes. Students that take breaks from their class work to be physically active throughout the school day are often better able to concentrate and do better in school, including improved scores on standardized tests. In addition to recess and physical education classes, experts are recommending that classroom teachers design active breaks so kids get up to move throughout

the school day. Both structured and unstructured physical activity is recommended – some benefits of unstructured time include increased creativity and self-reliance.

**Wellness Programs for Staff** – School wellness programs for school staff can help enhance employee performance and reduce health care costs. Teachers who maintain work/life balance have more energy, sleep better and serve as healthy lifestyle role models for their students. Some example wellness activities at green schools include free Zumba® and yoga classes, reduced rates for gym memberships, participation by staff in walk/bike to school events, and nutrition and stress management education.

**LEED for Schools** – LEED (an internationally recognized certification system for green buildings) for Schools recog-

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nizes the unique nature of the design and construction of K-12 schools. By addressing the uniqueness of school spaces and children's health issues, this program's rating system addresses issues such as classroom acoustics, daylight and views, mold prevention, and environmental site assessment.

**EPA Energy Star Schools** – Schools that receive this designation teach kids about becoming energy-efficient, prepare an energy strategy for the future, and establish a comprehensive energy management program. Top performing ENERGY STAR labeled schools cost forty cents per square foot less to operate than the average performers.

**Citizen Science Projects** - Citizen science in schools provides an opportunity for student participation in scientific research. Usually citizen scientists help gather data that is then analyzed by professional researchers. Project Budburst, for example, tracks how the phenology (the study of the timing of biological events in plants and animals, such as flowering and leafing) of plants is changing as a result of changing temperatures and rainfall patterns. People across the U.S. monitor plants as the seasons change and submit ecological data based on the timing of leafing, flowering, and fruiting of plants. This helps scientists predict how climate and ecosystems will change decades and even centuries into the future.

**Service Learning** – This teaching method enriches learning by engaging students in meaningful service to their schools and communities through a process that is carefully integrated with learning objectives. Students learn to solve real world problems. They not only learn the practical applications of their studies, but also

become actively contributing citizens and community members through the service they provide.

### Green Ribbon Schools

The U.S. Department of Education's Green Ribbon Schools recognition award is the top achievement that a green school can receive. One of the first ever schools to re-



ceive this award in 2012 is a Pine Job Elementary School in West Palm Beach, Florida. Since its in-

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ception in 2008, Pine Jog has been committed to promoting a culture of sustainability for future generations. Pine Jog has reduced energy use by various methods by 25 percent each year, enough to pay for one teacher's salary each year. Students manage all aspects of a 4,000-plant hydroponic garden, create artwork and musical instruments from items that would have gone to the landfill, and participate in the NASA Train Like an Astronaut program, through which they experience rigorous outdoor physical activities that are linked to the curriculum. The school campus has numerous outdoor classrooms, nine themed gardens, extensive nature trails and even beehives. Pine Jog is a Title 1 public school where 70 percent of the students are eligible for free or reduced lunch.

## How to Get Started

Successful green school programs start small, build on success and involve students, teachers, parents, school administrators and staff in the assessment and implementation of projects. Programs such as the Project Learning Tree's GreenSchools! program help provide a framework for student-led investigations of where improvements can be made and provide tips for developing a green school action plan.

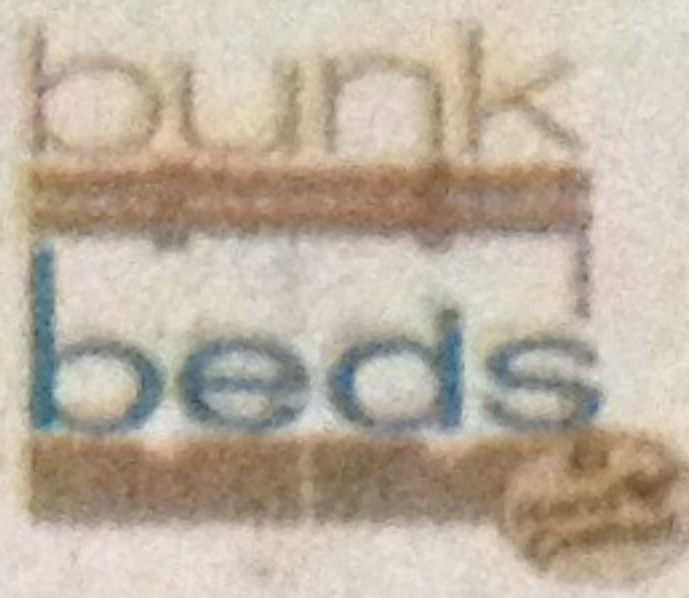
One in five people who live in the U.S. – 55 million children, teachers, administrators, nurses, and janitors – spend their days in K-12 schools. Schools can, and should, provide a healthy environment for students and staff, promote sustainable practices, and teach students to be responsible stewards of their community, the earth, and its resources.

To learn more about Green Schools visit:

Project Learning Tree  
GreenSchools! [www.plt.org/about-project-learning-tree](http://www.plt.org/about-project-learning-tree)

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